

A traditional symbol of appreciation for one's teacher has been, at least since that time long ago when I was a young student, the gift of a shiny red apple. As we celebrate National Teachers Appreciation Week, apples may no longer be the gift of choice but the idea remains the same. Students across the country this week will be encouraged to show their appreciation by providing teachers cards or poems written just for them, or volunteering to help clean the chalkboards (or other technologies!) after school.

The United States Congress also takes time this week to commend America's teachers for their dedication to the proper education and civic formation of our nation's youth: House Resolution 1312, which I am proud to co-sponsor, recognizes "the roles and contributions of America's teachers to building and enhancing our Nation's civic, cultural, and economic well-being," and "thanks and promotes the profession of teaching by encouraging students, parents, school administrators, and public officials to participate in teacher appreciation events."

Americans hold the role of educator in high esteem. According to one study, 62 percent of the American public believe teachers provide "the greatest benefit to society of any profession"—a four-to-one margin over the next-closest career category of physician. That high regard is no less strong in our own state. In Nebraska, we recognize the 23,332 teachers who serve more than 330,000 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through 12th grades in our state. According to the Nebraska State Board of Education, our educators have an average of more than 15 years of teaching experience, and provide diverse learning experiences in a variety of educational settings.

While 292,069 Nebraska students are enrolled in public schools, 38,053 are educated in private or parochial schools, and two percent of our state's children are homeschooled. In counties in the First District of Nebraska alone, our teachers are busy serving in nearly 360 public and 115 private schools, ensuring that our children receive exceptionally high-quality educations and increasing the high school graduation rate to nearly 90 percent, higher than the national average. In our state, teachers and students have greatly benefited from a strong sense of local control of our schools, which is strengthened and affirmed in our communities.

Albert Einstein believed that "it is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." Nebraska's teachers demonstrate a strong commitment to this pursuit, and their day-to-day efforts are reflected in the high achievement test scores of Nebraska students. Good teachers lay the foundation upon which children seek a life-long love of learning, pursue academic excellence, and become engaged members of their communities. This week is an opportune time to reflect on their important roles and take time to thank the teachers in our lives.